

Educational Research for Today's Higher Education Institutions: The Why and How

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In medieval times and right up to the days of John Henry Newman (The Idea of a University, 1873), the aim of higher education was to pursue knowledge for knowledge's sake, for this brings wisdom. Students were taught to seek the truth and research was pursued for curiosity's sake, not for some crass economic advantage. So the business of higher education was the getting of wisdom.

It has been argued that today the pendulum has swung the other way because higher education institutions see their main role as offering practical learning to prepare students for a career. A quick but effective way to show this is the popularity of straplines that proclaim their institutions as being 'a university for the real world' or 'a university where innovation meets application'. Try as one might, it is not possible to find a university game enough to say that 'We strive to make you wise'.

Thus, today's higher education does not spend enough time on what constitutes good citizenship, and too much time on the knowledge and skills needed for employment. The result is that we have graduates who are well prepared for what they do at work but do not know much about the kind of people they want to be. For example, there are not enough bankers who are familiar with Faust, a famous scholar in German legend, who, unhappy with his life, makes a deal with the devil, exchanging his soul (moral integrity) for unlimited knowledge and worldly pleasures. If there had been, those responsible for the global financial crisis might have thought twice about the consequences of their actions.

Higher education today should be about imparting knowledge and skills for good citizenship and work. For the study of its role in producing good citizens, research is needed on the most effective way to do this. Is it through having a significant proportion of the curriculum devoted to General Education? If so, should this be delivered along 'distributional units' or 'common core curriculum' lines or a mixture of the two? For the study of higher education's role in promoting economic growth, research is needed on the mix of primary, secondary and tertiary education, and of academic and vocational education. What is the socially optimum allocation of expenditure on each level and type of education?

The impact of education for good citizenship and economic growth will be weakened if the quality of the teaching is poor. Hence another area of educational research is what makes for effective teaching. This concerns not only the pedagogy of good curriculum development and the delivery of it but also the institutional system for recognising, rewarding and celebrating good teaching.

The research findings should be disseminated as widely as possible. One obvious publication avenue is the popular press where the exposure will be quick and wide. But the popular press is unlikely to be interested unless the findings are of a sensational nature. Another and more traditional avenue for academic research is professional or academic journals with good impact factors. And for this, there are traps that young researchers should be made aware of and avoid.